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## The History and Development of Sufism in Britain

*Abstract:* This paper provides an objective analysis of current trends and developments in the beliefs and practices of Sufis in Britain. Sufism is a dynamic and substantial presence within British Muslim communities and is influencing both religious and political discourses concerning the formation of Islam in Britain. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sufis have re-positioned themselves to represent the views of a “Traditional Islam”. Major transformations have taken place in Sufism that illuminate debates over authenticity, legitimacy, and authority within Islam, and religion more generally. Through examining the theory and history involved, as well as a series of case studies, Sufism in Britain charts the processes of change and offers a significant contribution to the political and religious re-organisation of the Muslim presence in Britain, and the West.

*Key words:* Sufism in Britain, “Traditional Islam”, tariqas.

### *Early Development*

Between 1890 and 1908, the English convert to Islam, William Abdullah Quilliam established a mosque in Liverpool in which a community of converts, lascars, Muslim university students and rich Muslim travellers arriving on the steamships in Liverpool worked together to establish the first organised Muslim presence in Britain [Geaves, 2010]. There is no evidence that Britain’s only Shaikh al-Islam was a Sufi in the sense of *tariqa* membership or having accepted *bai’a* (oath of allegiance) from a legitimate Sufi shaikh (teacher). However, Abdullah Quilliam celebrated *mawlid* (the Prophet’s birthday) at the mosque every year in Liverpool, decorated the mosque in the traditional mode of the Ottomans, and published *dhikr* (formulaic remembrance of Allah) and other Muslim creedal formulae known to Sufi adherents as part of his instruction to the

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new converts. Quilliam was a renowned Ottomanist and learned his Islam in Morocco and Turkey and never questioned the traditional Islam he observed and had no objections to Muslim visits to the shrines of the Sufis as long as their behaviour was appropriately restrained. In 1916 he translated the poetry of a Turkish Sufi after an extended stay in Istanbul, entitled *Sheikh Haroun Abdullah: A Turkish Poet and his Poetry*. He was fully aware of the Wahhabi movement but considered it to be a rebellion against the legitimate Sunni Caliphate and its customs and traditions. He welcomed the defeat which prevented them from extending into the Ottoman empire. Quilliam admired the mystical tradition of Islam and defined himself as an Ottoman Hanafi with an allegiance to traditional Islam. In exploring trends in British Sufism we will need to return to his terminology used to position himself within the world of Islam.

Abdullah Quilliam was raised in Liverpool at a time when Yemeni, Somali and Indian Muslims began to appear in the dock areas of the city. He worked closely with the sailors, functioning as their imam whilst they were in the city waiting for a ship to return to their ports of origin, he performed their funerals, marriages and provided both hospitality, accommodation and a place of prayer, but it was not until later that the Yemeni lascars were able to organise their own community building in Cardiff, Tyneside and Liverpool between the two world wars. These were created around religious centres (*zawiya*) led by North African Alawi Sufis (see Seddon in the present volume). The Yemeni sailors formed shifting dockyard settlements, many of them originating from Hadramaut where there was a tradition amongst Hadramis to leave their homeland and supplement their incomes. The region is a significant Sufi stronghold especially the Bani Alawi, whose shaikhs have contributed significantly to Hadrami settlement and religious life. However, the largest group of Yemeni migrants were Shamiris from around Aden who had little connection with the Bani Alawi and the earlier migrants from Hadramaut. It is these communities around the seaports that remain significant in the history of British Sufis and the organisation of religious life for British Muslims. Their seaport settlements, however, were not organised under the leadership of the Bani Alawi, but through the efforts of Shaykh Abdullah Ali al-Hakimi of the Alawi Shadhilli, a tariqa that remains significant in

the development of British Sufism in other contexts as this paper will demonstrate [Geaves, 2000, p. 65]<sup>1</sup>.

Sheikh Abdullah Ali al-Hakimi remained leader of the Yemeni communities in Britain in the late 1930s and 1940s until he returned to Aden in the early 1950s to become president of the Yemeni Union. He appears to have met his spiritual guide, Shaykh Ahmad ibn Mustafa al-‘Alawi al-Mustaghanimi, more commonly known as Shaykh al-‘Alawi, in Morocco in the late 1920s and to have been appointed a muqadam (teacher assisting the Shaikh) within his branch of the ‘Alawi tariqa. In the years before the second world war the ‘Alawi had extended their missionary activities beyond North Africa and had won many disciples among Yemeni seamen in European ports. Sheikh Abdullah had lived and worked in France and Holland before arriving in Britain in 1936. He founded what was known as the “Zaouia Islamia ‘Allawouia Religious Society in the United Kingdom” establishing zawiyas in Cardiff, South Shields, Hull and Liverpool.

Religious life was regularised and customary rituals and practices were introduced with colourful processions through the streets organised to mark the major Muslim festivals. In addition to celebrating the Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and mawlid, a fourth festival was introduced to commemorate the death of the founder of the Alawi tariqa who had died in 1934. On these occasions many of the seamen discarded their European clothing for Yemeni dress or the Arab dress of North Africa. Special attention was given to the religious instruction of children born to seamen and their Welsh and English wives. Classes in Quranic studies were organised for both boys and girls and also for those wives who had converted to Islam.

Sheikh Abdullah cultivated contacts with local government officials in both Cardiff and South Shields. Throughout the 1930s unemployment among Arab seamen at British ports remained acute and many were destitute. Support for Sheikh Abdullah’s efforts to strengthen the religious organisation of these communities were welcomed as far as the British authorities were concerned, At a dinner hosted by Sheikh Abdullah in Cardiff in July 1950, attended by the Deputy Lord Mayor and other leading citizens, the Assistant Chief Constable paid tribute to the law-abiding behaviour of

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<sup>1</sup> The story of these Arab port communities has been told in detail by Halliday, 1992; and more recently in Ansari, 2004. Mohammad Sedden is also researching al-Hakimi, see: Sedden, 2013.

the Muslim community under the Shaikh's leadership. This organisation of a migrant community around the leadership of a Sufi pre-shadowed the much larger post-war migration of South Asians in which Barelwi Sufi leaders from Pakistan and India were to play a major role until the present day.

Before coming to an analysis of this dominant South Asian presence and its impact on British Muslim life, it is important to note that the Shaikh 'Alawi was to influence trends in British Sufism in other significant ways. Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) is known as the inspiration of the Traditionalists and an exponent of the perennialist school of mysticism. His search for the Absolute would lead him on a journey through the world's sacred texts, including the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. He discovered the works of René Guénon and was influenced by his metaphysical position. He studied Arabic in Paris at the local mosque school and travelled to Algeria in 1932 where he also met the Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi and accepted initiation, taking the name 'Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad. In 1935, he visited Algeria and Morocco; and in 1938 and 1939, Egypt where he finally met Guénon after correspondence with him for nearly thirty years.

Schuon's meeting with Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi in Algeria would be instrumental in shaping Sufism in Europe and North America, and was especially influential in Britain. The Darqawiya was a Moroccan branch of the Shadhiliya founded in the last decades of the eighteenth century by Muhammad al-Arabi al-Darqawi (1760-1823). As stated the 'Alawiya branch of the Darqawiya was founded by Ahmad ibn Mustafa al-'Alawi al-Mustaghanimi, popularly known as Shaykh al-'Alawi, and one of the greatest renewers of Sufism in the Muslim world in the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. After his time with the Shaykh al-'Alawi in Algeria, Schuon returned to the West to found the Maryamiya branch of the Shadhiliya Order in Europe and North America where he promoted the teachings of the Shaykh. Sedgwick claims that of all the "neo-Sufi" groups, the Maryamiyya was the closest to Sufism as found in the Muslim world. However, he points out some key differences. He affirms that it was almost identical with other Shadhili branches with regard to practices, but it was far more relaxed in its approach to the Shari'a. He also notes that Schuon's version of the Traditionalist philosophy of René Guénon was taught alongside

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed biography see: Lings, 1993.

Sufism and included Guénon's anti-modernist philosophy of history which was in part influenced by Theosophy.

Schuon's first book *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* expresses fully his perennial stance, but later he wrote several texts on Islam, including *Understanding Islam*, *Dimensions of Islam*, and *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*. However, it is the people that he attracted to his 'Traditionalist' stance, often introducing them to the teachings of the Shaykh al-Alawi that were to be most influential. Some of his most eminent students include Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) and Martin Lings (1909-2005). Lings would publish the biography of the Shaykh al-Alawi under the title *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, which remains one of the most influential books on Sufism published in the western world. He would also write the acclaimed *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*.

Schuon's syncretic mix of traditional Islamic *tassawuf* and European or North American esotericism would combine with a British interest in Sufism as a form of esotericism that had been growing under the influence of Gurdjieff (1877-1949), Ouspensky (1878-1947), and Idries Shah (1924-1996), peaking in the 1960s and 1970s search for perennial wisdom in the alternative counter-culture milieus when young British men and women would travel to India or North Africa.

Half-a-century earlier, paralleling Abdullah Quilliam's and the Woking Mosque's efforts to establish Islam in Britain, the Chishti Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan arrived in England in 1910. Inayat Khan was versed in a style of truth-seeking unique to a certain kind of north Indian cultural/religious milieu in which Sufism and Yoga merged into a syncretic claim to a universal truth embodied in the *Upanishads*, the *Qur'an*, and the poetry of Sufi and Sant mystics. Immersed in this eclectic background from childhood he taught a form of Sufism that was uprooted from shari'a, and transcended the borders of discrete world religions. Hazrat Khan's vision of an inner essence of religion achieved by direct experience echoed with the message of the Theosophists and the Gurdjieffian oriental esotericism and consequently attracted the same kind of seeker. Conversion to Islam was never part of his message of eclectic spirituality with an emphasis on the universal aspects of mystical experience.

Sedgwick is convinced that all these "neo-Sufi" trends, as he labels them, are rooted in western spirituality, with an emphasis on the individual spiritual search that he argues has no equivalent in the Muslim world. He

also notes that although some eastern Sufis may have displayed a more ecumenical spirit with regard to other forms of spirituality that they encountered, the Traditionalist's version of perennialism that perceived Sufism as an outer manifestation of a universal and essential mysticism was not the Islamic interpretation of the tradition [Sedgwick, 2009, p. 184]. The relationship between the Perennials and the Muslim world is succinctly described by Sedgwick who may have over-emphasised the distinction between the Traditionalist's brand of western Sufism and Islam. I would argue that the borders between these two had always been fluid and the degree to which the shari'a was followed, although problematic, is not a definitive test of allegiance to Islam. Shari'a compliance is often used to critique Sufis in the arena of contestation between Islamic forms of religiosity amongst Muslims and Muslim Sufis have ranged considerably in their interpretations of shari'a. The trajectory of individual transformation achieved by contact with Sufis in North Africa or the Middle East would appear to be in a number of cases drifting towards a gradual Islamicisation. Evidence exists in Britain that the two phenomena were not disassociated from each other. The first migrants from India and Pakistan were arriving in Britain at around the same time as counterculture individuals were following in the footsteps of the Traditionalists. Little is known of contacts between them but anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the two groups were interconnected or, at least, fleetingly aware of the presence of each other.

The first counter-culture contact with Sufism in the second half of the twentieth century appeared to occur through rediscovery of the 'Alawi sheikhs who had succeeded the Sheikh al 'Alawi in Mostaganem, Algeria. Robert Irwin has courageously presented his story of conversion to Islam and visits to Mostaganem whilst a Merton College undergraduate between 1965 and 1967 in his recently published *Memoirs of a Dervish* [Irwin, 2011]. In his memoirs the young Oxford undergraduate recounts arriving at the *zawiya* where he gained entry by producing a copy of Martin Lings' biography of the great Sufi revivalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The *fugara* were amazed to discover their founder's photograph on the cover. Robert Irwin left his copy at the *zawiya* as a gift and this resulted in the French translation of the book.

Martin Lings (also known as Abu Bakr Siraj Ad-Din) (1909-2005) had also been an Oxford undergraduate at Magdalen College where he discovered the writings of René Guénon, a French metaphysician and Muslim convert, and those of Frithjof Schuon, the German perennialist. In

1938, Lings went to Basle to make Schuon's acquaintance. After a spell in Egypt he returned to the United Kingdom achieving a BA in Arabic and a PhD from the SOAS. His most famous work was a biography of Muhammad, written in 1983, which earned him acclaim in the Muslim world and prizes from the governments of Pakistan and Egypt.

Robert Irwin mentions in his Memoirs that on arrival in Mostaganem, he was informed that he had just missed Sidi Ahmed, described as majdhub (a holy fool, one crazed by God). Sidi Ahmed was an earlier English convert and a mature student at Merton during the same period. Irwin attributes his conversion to Islam to meeting a fellow undergraduate Sidi Ahmed who had travelled to Algeria earlier before returning to study Arabic at Merton College. Like Martin Lings, whose Sufi group he would later attend, Sidi Ahmed had been drawn to the writings of Guenon and Schuon. Born Harvey Mellor in Yorkshire, he was something of a prodigal. At the age of 14 he had decided that Islam was the true religion after exploring the doctrines of the world's major faiths. His challenge was to become a Muslim in the Britain of the 1950s. As a fifteen year old he hitchhiked to Sheffield where someone had told him there were Muslims working in the steel works. The fifteen year old found himself confronted with a group of Pakistani night shift workers with little knowledge of English and attempted to explain that he wanted witnesses to his *shahadah*. He explained to me recently that he was never sure that it had been done correctly and two years later he reaffirmed his allegiance to Islam in Woking Mosque. Sidi Ahmed, Robert Irwin, Martin Lings are significant in that they converted to Islam and practised Sufism as Muslims. Sidi Ahmed's story of his conversion is also significant in that his encounter with Pakistani night shift workers in Sheffield and his maintenance of daily Muslim life in Oxford involved praying in the basement of the city's first curry house owned by East Pakistanis (Bangladeshis).

The proximity of North Africa, compared with India, would attract a continuous flow of counter-culture seekers of the oriental experience from Western Europe. Contact with the Shadhili or Darqawi *tariqas* was therefore inevitable. Both of these orders had been rejuvenated from time to time by charismatic shaykhs, most notably, as we have seen, the Shaykh al-ʿAlawi. Most significant amongst European contacts with the *tariqa* is the Mirabitun movement, founded in Britain by Ian Dallas around 1976. Dallas, a writer and actor, had travelled to Morocco in 1967 where he was initiated into the Darqawiya and took the name Abd al-Qadir. Somewhere

around 1976, a group of British and North American followers gathered around Shaykh Abd al-Qadir in a row of derelict houses in London. Little study has been carried out on the group and its activities but Köse notes that they numbered between twenty and thirty and were all former members of 1960's counter-culture and had taken drugs prior to contact with Sufism [Köse, 1996, p. 176]. Although the group dressed in green turbans and traditional Moroccan dress, conversion to Islam was seen as secondary to acquiring Sufism. Yet, like the earlier Traditionalists and the Oxford undergraduates, many would embrace Islam as a feature of Sufi lifestyle. Shaykh al-Qadir would become more overtly Muslim throughout 1976. He insisted that followers withdraw from a western lifestyle, even to the extent of removing children from mainstream schools. He initiated public prayer meetings in Hyde Park and his writings began to be translated into Arabic. After visiting Libya, he announced himself as a unifying shaykh of the Shadhili and Darqawiya. At the end of 1976 he moved his community to near Norwich in Norfolk, with the intention of establishing a fully self-sufficient village of believers. The community purchased Wood Daling Hall, a mansion with extensive grounds. At its peak, the community numbered around two hundred families, forming the Darqawi Institute. Shaykh al-Qadir would travel extensively throughout the Muslim world achieving fame internationally as a scholar. For a variety of reasons the community fragmented. Shaykh al-Qadir moved to Andalucia and in 1994, a new offshoot of the movement was founded in Scotland. The original community remains in Norwich and is still active in promoting Islam in Britain [Geaves, 2000, pp. 142-144].

The Darqawi Institute is important for a number of reasons. Köse notes that the movement had two distinct phases. In the first, Abd al-Qadir attracted new followers through promoting himself as a Sufi who emphasised the esoteric teachings of the tradition. In the second, he shifted to an emphasis on the outer practices of Islam and shari'a compliance. Although Sufism was perceived as the authentic version of Islamic practice, and embedded in Sunni traditionalism, the promotion of Islam in the West became the primary objective of the movement. This is significant as it confirms the fluid borders between Sufism encountered as an esoteric but universal mysticism and Islamic allegiance. Perhaps more significantly for the development of Sufism in the West, the movement would produce a number of individuals who would have an impact today, bridging the borders between convert Sufis and the British children of South Asian



migrants with a pre-existing Sufi familial allegiance. Shaykh Yasin Dutton remembers that such contacts were already taking place in the 1970s when the Sufis of the Norwich community would travel around England in order to meet with South Asian shaykhs who were beginning to teach in the inner cities where Muslims migrants had recently settled. This re-emerging Maghrebi influence on Sufi allegiance in Britain links back to the the Yemeni dominated seaport communities in Cardiff, Liverpool, Hull and Tyneside that had their origins in the expansion of the British merchant fleet and the consequent mass employment of Asian sailors, who owed their religious and social organisation to the spiritual descendents of the Shaykh al-‘Alawi. They remind us that before the influx of the post-war South Asian migrants the dominant force in British Sufism originated in the Maghreb. It has never disappeared and is now re-emerging as one of the major points of contact for British-born children of the South Asian migrants who wish to divest themselves of the ethnic dimension in their parent’s and grandparent’s Sufism.

### *The South Asian migrations*

These early encounters between British Sufi converts to Islam and the newly arriving South Asian migrants were to be drowned out by the prolific numbers of arrivals in England throughout the 1970s and sheer numerical dominance of the South Asians in establishing a Muslim presence in Britain. But unbeknown to many, a new avenue for the construction of British Sufism had arrived transforming the inner city cultural map of England’s old manufacturing cities. South Asian Islam has been dominated by Sufism since its inception in the subcontinent and many of new arrivals brought with them strong allegiances to the traditions of cultural/religious milieu of their places of origin including membership of *tariqas*. Amongst the migrants, there were even prominent Sufi shaikhs who began to establish Qur’an classes for children, mosques and zawiya, first in terraced houses, then in converted mills and finally by the 1980s purpose-built mosques loyal to the Barelwi tradition of South Asia. If Sidi Ahmed had travelled further south to Birmingham he might have found the Pakistani factory nightshift where Sufi Abdullah of the Naqshbandiya laboured at night whilst teaching Qur’an to the children of the migrant workers during the

day, slowly building up powerful Sufi institutions for the Pakistanis in the city. Similarly other Sufis from the Subcontinent had established strongholds in Bradford, Coventry, and Manchester. Mosques declared their loyalty to the Barelwis even when no Sufi was in residence, with imported ulema whose allegiance was to the tradition.

### *Sufis in the West*

Klinkhammer has pointed out that any assessment of the Sufi presence in European nations must take into account patterns of immigration and the different situations in the countries of origin of Muslim migrants in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries, for example, 80 % of Muslim migrants in Germany originate from Turkey where Sufism is not widely represented or, at least, not publicly visible. The ban on Sufi Orders in Turkey in 1925 strongly limited the public practice of Sufism and would have significance for the public representation of Sufism amongst Muslim migrants in Germany and elsewhere [Klinkhammer, 2009, p. 144]. In Britain, where the great majority of Muslims originate from rural Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, Sufism is practised as a popular religion in the villages and towns. This is duplicated in the strongholds of South Asian migrant presence in British cities. In France, where the majority of migrants are from North Africa, Sufism, although once dominant is less so due to the changing formations of Algerian Islam after the struggle for independence. Other factors influencing the development of Sufism are critical mass of migration, class and ethnicity of the migrants and the presence of individual Sufi leaders among the migrants.

Initially the appropriation of Sufism by western orientalist and successive generations of seekers of a “mystical truth” hid the vibrant reality of millions of traditional Muslims in the Muslim world who practised the core disciplines of Sufism as an integral part of Islam firmly based on the teachings of the Qur’an and Hadith. Until the arrival of migrant populations in post World War II Western Europe, the articulate Sufi intellectuals hid the everyday life of traditional Muslims and the role of the *tariqas* and the shrines of deceased Sufis in Muslim religious life. Sufism in the West was an elitist presence with fluid links to Islamic religiosity. The everyday religious life of traditional Muslims would not have a significant impact

on Sufism in the West until the 1960s when some nations in Western Europe began to be transformed by the arrival of various Muslim populations, in the case of Britain predominantly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, but also from Malaysia, Turkish Cyprus, Iran, Yemen, North, West and East Africa. These are all places where, either historically or as a living faith tradition, Sufism is significant.

Although slow to organize themselves in the British Muslim diaspora, the last twenty years have seen the transplantation of several prominent Sufi *tariqas* including various offshoots of the Naqshbandis, Chishtis, Qadiris, Mevlevis, Alawis, Shadhilis and Tijanis. This pattern repeats itself in other nations of Western Europe, Scandinavia and North America. This significant presence of Sufis or Sufi-influenced Muslims, has done much to offset the appropriation of Sufism by western orientalists and has to a significant degree restored the awareness of the Sufi path at the heart of traditional Islam. However, it could be argued that even with the establishment of the *tariqas*, wherever Muslim populations have settled in Western Europe and North America, Sufism remains relatively invisible both to academics and the general public as other aspects of Muslim religious life have dominated the agenda for political and security reasons.

The dominance of Muslims of South Asian origin in the British context has perpetuated custom-laden Sufism with its roots in the subcontinent and continued historic rivalries between *tariqas* and with other Islamic movements that have been historical competitors in the highly contested religious environment of colonial India. The subcontinent Sufis, with their custom-laden version of Islam focused on the intercession of saints and the Prophet, shrines, *baraka* (the power to bless), powers, miracles and the performance of *dhikr* maintained within the *shaykh/murid* relationship, had never successfully organized themselves nationally in Britain in spite of their apparent numerical superiority. Even so, the arrival of a number of charismatic Sufi *pirs* and *shaykhs* from the subcontinent provided the impetus for greater cohesion as they formed powerful groups of Sufis able to construct mosques and produce promotional literature to counter the reformist movements. The traditional loyalty of each group of *murids* to their own *shaykh* undermined this push towards a stronger and more assertive national identity.

Moreover, the establishment of these *tariqas* has provided a series of organizational structures to Sufi adherents and capitalized on the strong empathy with the teachings of traditional Islam amongst British Muslim

populations. The term “traditional Islam” is used in this context to distinguish a brand of Islam that acknowledges 1400 years of tradition as authoritative alongside the teachings of Qur’an and Sunna and recognizes the contribution of Sufi spirituality, the legal interpretations of the *ulama* and the four schools of law. This label of traditional Islam has been harnessed by Sufis and Sufi sympathizers in opposition to neo-orthodoxies which have vociferously criticised Sufism, accusing it of introducing *bida* (innovation) into the Muslim religious arena.

Thus, in recent years the representatives of the *tariqas* have provided a unifying Islamic discourse based on practice and belief and drawing upon the traditional loyalty of the above populations to the leadership of *pirs* and *shaykhs* rather than the *ulama*. They have also discovered a successful discourse that is able to recruit from the younger generations of British Muslims. However, unlike the USA, Sufism has made less impact on the original non-migrant non-Muslim population, and with the exception of the Haqqani Naqshbandis, led by the charismatic Shaykh Nazim, very few outside of the Muslim migrant communities have been attracted. The main contributory reason for this difference, at least, up to the end of the twentieth century was that Sufism in Britain, in particular, remained associated with ethnic identity and communication in Urdu, a means of maintaining traditions and customs tightly bound with localities in the place of origin. Thus Sufism has functioned not so much as a transmission of mysticism within Islam, able to cross over to a universal mysticism sought by western seekers, but as a boundary mechanism primarily concerned with the transmission of cultural and religious traditions. However, this is only part of the story.

In recent years, there are signs of significant change. The British Sufi scene now demonstrates marked attempts to carve out a new cultural and religious space that creatively interacts with the new environment of Britain<sup>1</sup>. The *tariqas* have become more aware of the need to draw upon the transnational and trans-cultural nature of globalised memberships and to articulate the narratives of *tasawwuf* and traditional Islamic sciences in an intellectual environment, addressing both Muslims and non-Muslims in the lingua franca. The World Wide Web is an essential aspect of this globalisation. The online presence of traditional Muslim *tasawwuf* does not

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed study of these developments see a series of articles written by the author: Geaves, 2005; 2006; 2009.

advertise itself as Sufism or even rally behind the epithet of *ahl as-Sunna wa Jama'at*, but rather prefers to speak of itself as representing traditional Islam and the teachings of the four *madhhabs*. The websites originate in Spain, Britain and North America and address themselves specifically to Muslims in the West.

Influential converts, notably Shaikh Nur Ha Nim Keller and Shaikh Abdul-Hakim Murad, are able to communicate fluently in English and are often members of academia. They are not exponents of an Islam imbedded in local tradition and are often fluent in their understanding and use of *fiqh*. These western Sufis are as scriptural as their Salafi adversaries, able to utilise Qur'an and Hadith to great effect to put across their message on the issues that matter to them. Ethnicity is transcended to discover common cause in either a universal consciousness of *ummah* or the ideological belonging to Traditional Islam. For young British Muslims of South Asian origin, inspiration is more likely to come from such figures as it is from the South Asian elders in the *tariqas* who are still perceived to pull up drawbridges of isolation in their respective spiritual fiefdoms of Coventry, Birmingham, Bradford or Manchester. *Tasawwuf* in Britain, North America and Western Europe is beginning to go trans-global and escape the confines of ethnicity and locality. Marcia Hermansen comments on this drawing together of "theirs" and "ours" and argues that mobility, rapid dissemination of information and encounters of Eastern (Muslim) and Western individuals has brought about the creation of trans-global networks that to some extent override the old orientalist discrepancies of power described by Said. She asserts that "'theirs' and 'ours' ultimately converge in an age of globalism" [Hermansen, 2009, p. 26]. The re-emergence of the North African influenced western converts operating on a global scale, but above all, able to position themselves prominently in the struggle for Islamic authenticity, and attract the British and North American children of the migrants whose forefathers belonged to traditional *tariqas* in their places of origin begs a reassessment of Sedgwick's differentiation of Sufism and neo-Sufism. Sedgwick's argument that Western Sufism always emphasizes the individual spiritual search as distinguished from the Eastern approach of a guided journey may need to be reassessed as the allegiance of young European and North American children of migrants reassess their parents' and grandparents' Sufism in the light of their in-between status in western society.

*The re-emergence of Sufism*

Writing in 2005, I had concluded that recent developments suggested that the multitude of movements and mosques that represent traditional Islam, as embodied in the beliefs and practices that they declared to be normative of the *Ahl-i Sunnat wa-jamaat*, were beginning to respond to the challenges presented to them by the reformist Wahhabi/Salafist critique [Geaves, 2005]. There is no doubt that the efforts to promote the revivalist message of a pure and universal Islam amongst young British-born Muslims anxious to define their identity has borne dividends for the revivalist movements. The *turuq* and mosques claiming allegiance to the *Ahl-i Sunnat wa-jamaat* banner had often been perceived as centres to maintain loyalties and relationships established in the country of origin and important to the older generation of migrants. They were also seen to be fragmented and obsessed with maintaining ancient feuds and divisions within the *ummah*. Evidence for the ‘insider’ Sufi narrative that claims a counter revival of the *tariqas* and their supporters, not in Western esotericism or the immanentist mysticism of Ibn‘l Arabi, nor, as in Britain, the popular ritual practices common with the South Asian *pirs* and the shrines associated with their ancestors, but in a well-developed narrative of traditional Islam rooted in the Qur‘an, Sunna and the legitimate traditions of the four schools of law is not easy to demonstrate. This article has used the case study of Sufis in Britain to show that a number of high profile Western converts and Levant and Maghreb Shaykhs have begun to emerge as a major influence on second and third generation South Asian origin British Muslims, drawing upon global networks and significant use of the world-wide web [Raudvere and Stenberg, 2009, p. 1]. These voices are able to articulate already existing discursive narratives of the South Asian *shaykhs* that arrived through migration, but perceived to be devoid of the cultural baggage that was so successfully used by the reformist opponents of the South Asian *turuq* as they attempted to carve out a space for their particular version of Islam within British Muslim identity politics. Whereas the British Salafi, Wahhabi, Jamaat-i Islami and Muslim Brotherhood reformists were able to recreate the Islamic paradigm of the global *ummah* to develop international links, challenge local cultural forms of Islam, promote a narrative of “British Islam” and politicize under the banner of religion, entering even into mainstream politics, the Sufis learned to counter

with an understanding of *ummah* that was more than a collectivity extending across geographical Muslim space but also back across the generations, linked by *isnad* and *silsila* (chains of transmission) to the Prophet himself.

International comparisons might be helpful to determine if there is global revival of Sufism across the Muslim world. There is no doubt that some Sufis have tried to reposition themselves as the moderate or peace-loving representatives of mainstream Sunni Islam, but the success of such strategies are hard to gauge. Itzhak Weismann has claimed that since the 1980s, as Muslim governments struggled against the radical upsurge, and with the general increase of interest in “Oriental” mysticism in the Western world, there has been a significant revival in Sufi activities [Weismann, 2004, p. 303]. According to Weismann this re-emergence occurred after a period of losing ground throughout the twentieth century to both the forces of modernity and Islamic reformist movements. This pattern identified by Weisman is paralleled to some degree in the British context.

Weismann also reminds us that the criticisms of popular Sufism are not the sole prerogative of modern reformist movements, or even the earlier thirteenth and fourteenth century critique by the Hanbali theologian Ahmad ibn Taymiyya and continued by the influential eighteenth century and nineteenth century Wahhabi movements but that Sufism was capable of rigorous self-examination. He points out that the reform and revival of Islam even in these earlier centuries was more likely to come from Sufis than the “ultra orthodox Wahhabiyya” or their predecessors [Weissman, 2007, p. 8]. He considers that is precisely these reforming Sufi brotherhoods originating in the pre-modern era which have proved resilient in the modern circumstances. This would appear to be borne out by developments in Britain where Naqshbandis and other Sufi orders where traditional forms of Islamic religious life co-exist with the disciplines of the tariqa. .

Hamid argues that “Traditional Islam” can be compared with “neo-Sufism” as defined by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988). Rahman uses the term to refer to the reformist branches of Sufism described by Weissman, that is, an impulse to maintain Sufism within the orthodox features of Islam through auto-reforming impulses by conservative traditionalists among the Sufi orders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Hamid, the “Traditional Islam” network is able to demonstrate both “continuity with history and change in relation to the impact of modernity” and, in the British context, “re-invent and distinguish their religiosity from other Sufi currents and activist Islamic groups” [Hamid, 2012].

Hamid's study of "Traditional Islam" among Muslim activists in Britain and Weissman's longitudinal perspective of Muslims in Palestine raise the question of "newness" in the revival of Sufism rebranded as traditional Muslim orthodoxy. The revival would seem to challenge Werbner's anthropological studies of Pakistani Sufism that posit a pattern of "waxing and waning" of Sufi movements based upon the classic Weberian theory of charisma and institutionalization. Werbner argues that Sufism is revived through the charisma of the living "saint" but the revival of the late twentieth century seems to suggest a more diffused charisma than that held in the person of shaykh and is rather an integral part of Islamicisation processes across the Muslim world [Werbner, 2003]. Increasingly Sufism is being repackaged not so much as a "network of disciples" but rather as a set of beliefs and practices that constitute normative Islam [Heck, 2009, p. 15].

On the other hand, John Voll is uneasy with analyses of these trends as either reactions against modernity or secularism as represented by western influenced Muslim elites or even a searching for Islamic commitment that offers a more acceptable choice than the discredited jihadists and their allies. He argues that we need to understand the popularity of Sufism in the Muslim world in the light of a growing literature on "post-materialist values in late- or post-modern societies" [Voll, 2007, p. 296-298]. He draws upon Inglehart's theorizing of "postmodernization" replacing modernization and reflecting a shift of "what people really want out of life" [Inglehart, 2003, p. 328]. However, such processes have to be seen in the context of changes to western spirituality in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, described by Inglehart as a failure of confidence in "organized religion" but where spirituality remains secure as a repository for a "cross-national tendency for people to spend more time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life" [Ibid.]. This view is echoed by studies undertaken of contemporary British religious life by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in which they argue that "religion might be in decline, but spirituality – perceived to be less dogmatic, more tolerant and flexible, and better suited to the pursuit of personal inner quests is waxing" [Woodhead et al., 2003, p. 2]. Yet there is little evidence of the separation of religion and spirituality in Muslim societies or other societies where the religious worldview remains the dominant paradigm for understanding reality. Such theories to explain the revival of Sufism would need to take account of second and third generation Muslims and also provide homes for converts in Western



Europe and North America, let alone the attraction of Sufism to Muslim intellectuals, shopkeepers, taxi drivers and the *ulama*. The theories of a post-modern separation of religion and spirituality can be applicable for middle-class elites in the Muslim world but would need to be explored as only one factor in the complex mix of motivations that require offering allegiance to Sufism as an Islamic option.

The return to “Traditional Islam” with its powerful discourse of authentic traditions verified by unbroken chains of transmission to the foundational figures of Islam, and its emphasis on allegiance to the four schools of law combined with sober piety, would seem to be a trend that reversed the emphasis on universalism and eclecticism that can be found in more ecstatic forms of Sufism that could meet and accommodate new spiritualities in Western Europe and North America. Returning to Voll’s unease, it is clear from analyses of the content of the websites loyal to “Traditional Islam” that their discursive oppositional apologetic remains largely targeted at Salafi and Wahhabi reformist positions and that contemporary Sufis and their supporters are not adverse from repositioning themselves as the voice of moderate Islam, and thus “discrediting jihadists”. In addition, the Muslim converts who dominate the discourses on the websites were often influenced at some point on their journeys by the Traditionalists, especially Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The Traditionalists were also passionate critics of modernism because it denied the ancient and absolute truths of a perennial wisdom that is part of the collective inheritance of revelation and inspiration. The critique of contemporary values is heard in Schuon’s warnings.

“Because one no longer admits...the supersensible dimensions... one seeks the solution to the cosmogonic problem on the sensory plane and one replaces true causes with imaginary ones which, in appearance at least, conform with the possibilities of the corporeal world... In doing this, one forgets what man is, and one forgets also that a purely physical science, when it reaches vast proportions, can only lead to catastrophe...” [Schuon, 1969, p. 67],

or

“That which is lacking in the present world is a profound knowledge of the nature of things; the fundamental truths are always there, but they do not impose themselves because they cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen” [Ibid., p. 28].

Arguably such sentiments are not peculiar to criticisms of contemporary society but would have found a sympathetic ear with the philosophers and mystics who developed Sufi understandings of the human condition in the early centuries of Islam. Yet is clear that any understanding of the revival of Sufism in its varied forms needs to detach itself from theoretical frameworks that Sufi traditionalism appeals to conservative voices who remain attracted to the old ways and resist modernisation. It is apparent, that neither in Muslim majority nations nor in Britain's Muslim enclaves, does Sufism represent any longer a vehicle for expressing rural piety. It is at least as urban as the Islamic movements are often claimed to be. Globalisation plays a part, not only through migration and physical travel but new technologies as a means of communication of ideas. As to whether "Traditional Islam" is an emergent trend in the history of Muslim contestation, Zaman reminds us that: "appeals to tradition are not necessarily a way of opposing change but can equally facilitate change; that what passes for tradition is, not infrequently of quite recent vintage; and that definition of what constitutes tradition are often the product of bitter and continuing conflicts within a culture" [Zaman, 2007, p. 3].

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